



## **Department of Health - Making Experiences Count: new approach to responding to complaints - a consultation**

17 October 2007

Together the Association of British Dispensing Opticians, the Association of Optometrists, the College of Optometrists and the Federation of Ophthalmic & Dispensing Opticians represent the 10,000 optometrists and 5,000 dispensing opticians who provide high quality and accessible eye care services in the UK.

As independent contractors, most of whom practise on the high street, optometrists and dispensing opticians have a business, as well as a professional interest in keeping their patients, who are also customers, happy. Complaints that arise are normally resolved very quickly within the practice, to the satisfaction of the patient. The big national companies and supermarkets also have national complaints systems of their own.

It is in everyone's interest that lessons are learned from complaints as the same complaint recurring is not only bad for patient care, but also bad for business. We agree with the proposal to give people the opportunity to resolve a problem informally without lodging a complaint which is the norm in the optical sector. We would hope that the new single portal / NHS system will always refer the patient back to the practice for resolution in the first instance.

The registered optical professions already fund an independent complaints service, the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS), which deals with complaints about spectacle, contact lenses or service issues. These complaints totalled 775 in 2006, a comparatively low figure given that there were around 10.5 million NHS sight tests carried out in England in 2006/07. The General Optical Council (GOC), as regulator, deals with professional complaints. The number of complaints made to the GOC in the year 2006/07 dropped to 129 from 182 in the previous year. Whilst the number of complaints has fallen the number of optometrists and dispensing opticians has risen by around 2% to 16,002 during the same period.

One point to note is that although the number of complaints about the optical professions is very small it is sometimes the case that patients use a 'scatter gun' approach when complaining. This means that the same complaint can go to the local Primary Care Organisation, OCCS and the GOC all of which impose additional costs that are ultimately borne by patients. It is for this reason that we would urge any NHS system not to be any more onerous than the current one, and would encourage the use of local resolution wherever possible.

We hope this is helpful – if you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact us.